

Transcript: Jeff Heskins

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[0:00:00]

Interviewer: Jeff, could you tell me a bit about your background, can you talk to me about your childhood, where you grew up?

Respondent: Well, I was born in Australia and I spent the first two or three years there before my parents, who had emigrated there after the war, returned with me along with my then brother and my two older sisters. And we remained a family of four, as I grew up in Kent, until the birth of my younger sister in 1960. Effectively we operated as two families; my elder siblings had all moved away by the time I really got to know them, and so it was me and my younger sister. So I grew up in Canterbury and I went to a local Canterbury primary school and failed my 11+, failed my audition to get into the cathedral choir, and so I was a glowing failure.

Interviewer: I was going to say, you know, you can see a PhD coming up almost immediately.

Respondent: Indeed, indeed. I went to secondary modern school, and I stayed there for six years because I had to take CSEs before O Levels, they didn't do A Levels, but...

Interviewer: So you had your CSEs first and then they let you do O Levels?

Respondent: Then they let you do O Levels, and they weren't equipped to teach A Level there, so I had to be transferred to the grammar school since by that time, I had discerned a calling to ordination and it required me to go and study at a higher level.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And my then bishop required me to go to King's College London, there was no question of there being anything else.

Interviewer: Really? Who was your bishop?

Respondent: Tony Tremlett was the Bishop of Dover, and I remember going to see him in the late 1970s with my shoulder length hair. He lived on a hillside at St Martin's and it was a very blowy day and as he arrived at the door, you know, I was busy sort of straightening myself up, and he said, "Hmm, don't worry about that," he said, "Your hair is rather long." He said, "As long as you don't get like Absalom, you know what happened to him, don't you?" And of course, I didn't know, I had never touched the Old Testament, and then he told me, "Well, he got caught in a tree and they came along and killed him." I thought, "This is a nice opening to our interview, Bishop."

Interviewer: So was your church, your family were a religious family? Did you go to church as a family?

Respondent: Well, no, we were hatch, match and dispatch Christians, and I got into church really via the other boys who I played football with in the street, because on a Friday night, they all used to buzz off early and I discovered they were going to choir practice. And when they told me you got paid, I asked if I could join. So I did, I went to join and I had quite a good treble voice, because as I said earlier, I auditioned for the cathedral choir, and if you had quite a good voice, you got creamed off to sing solos at weddings, which meant...

Interviewer: More money.

Respondent: Well, it was, you know, it was half a crown a throw, you know, and we were in the parish that had the oldest church in North-West Europe, so you know, you could clear five weddings on a Saturday, and go home with quite a lot of dosh. But that's what got me there, but it isn't what kept me there. I mean, what really kept me and inspired my sense of calling was the parish priest. And my RE teacher and between them, Father Donaldson and Mr Preece really taught me a depth of spirituality and a language, an easy language to talk about God and Jesus without feeling embarrassed or ashamed. And I've always been very grateful to those two in particular for that, because it really saw me through the next phase of preparing myself for ordination, going to what was then a selection conference and...

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Interviewer: In Aachen?

Respondent: I went to Aachen, that's right, and I was...

Interviewer: Were you older then when you did A Levels, were you two years older than all the others?

Respondent: Yes, all the boys that I'd been at school with were in the upper sixth when I was in the lower sixth, because...

Interviewer: Right, so there was a bit...but it wasn't too jarring?

Respondent: I didn't find it so, really, we hadn't seen each other for four or five years, you know, and by the time you're 18, that's quite a big chunk of your life. So no, it didn't really bother me.

Interviewer: And did you go straight to King's London from there?

Respondent: Yes, I had it in my head that somehow I would not, my brain was probably as big as it was ever going to be, and I wasn't a natural academic, and unlike my own children, who've been taught how to pass exams, I didn't. So I went with minimal grades, I think that King's required me to have two Cs to enter the Faculty of Theology, and I actually got a C, a D and an E. So another failure. But I got a letter from the Dean of King's, the very smooth Sidney Hall-Evans the next day, saying, you know, "We got your results, we'd still like you to come anyway."

Interviewer: Oh good.

Respondent: And that was good. So you know, off I trundled to London straight away, with my suitcases sitting on the platform and with my mother sitting by my side waving me off, and I entered the first year at King's College London and lived in community at the then theological hostel in Vincent's Square.

Interviewer: Right. Was that when it was cheap?

Respondent: It was certainly inexpensive, but it was also a special design that the Dean had got because in those days, most people's training, there was no such things as a part-time course, it was all residential training, but training lasted for five years.

Interviewer: Wow.

Respondent: But the course that I went on, the King's course was especially reduced course for four years, where you spent three years reading theology in the university, and you spent one year at theological college which was then at St Augustine's in Canterbury. So I

knew about that, because I knew some of the students who had been there, I had even come across a very young looking then Ken Leach, who was on the teaching staff at the time. And yes, so I think that...yes, but what happened in my first term at King's was the House of Bishops met with Synod and they were looking to close some theological colleges, and one of them that got the axe was St Augustine's. So I found myself having to look for a theological college at the end of my time at university, which would offer me a one year course. And I found Chichester.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And it was Chichester that I went to, it was Chichester I had no idea, I was terribly naïve about churchmanship and all that caper, so you know, if you look at my Croxford's entry, you'd think, quite naturally, that I'm a conservative Anglo-Catholic, and in fact, nothing could be further from the truth, but I can still genuflect, even at my age.

[00:07:10]

Interviewer: Yes, I can just about (inaudible 00:07:12). Yeah, so once ordained, just canter me through the career after that.

Respondent: Okay, well, between university and theological college, I spent two years working in the health service in psychiatry.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Respondent: I worked at the Royal Free Hospital, first of all as an auxiliary nurse in the psychiatric unit, and then I transferred because I was attached to a church, and the vicar there wanted me to do more regular hours, so I transferred to the occupational therapy department, where I was in charge of the OT workshop.

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: So that meant that I had to count out the chisels and make sure they all came back at the end of the day. Then I went to theological college and then I was ordained into London Diocese to serve at St Mary Primrose Hill in the episcopal area of Edmonton. I had four very happy years there, it was a fabulous time, a brilliant priest.

Interviewer: Was four years an exceptionally long first curacy?

Respondent: It was, it was...but it was because in my, at the end of my third year, my vicar left to do another job and so I offered to stay and hold the...

Interviewer: Curate in charge sort of thing.

Respondent: And that was a good experience for me, but you know, it was a very formative time and again, with an exceptionally brilliant priest who I admired enormously. My big problem, I think in those days, was that I admired other people but wasn't quite sure about myself. So I spent a lot of time wanting to be like other people instead of discovering me. And Richard, my vicar, I think helped me grow in confidence in such a way that I was able to eventually be more the person that I am, rather than just wanting to be a carbon copy of someone else.

Interviewer: And from there?

Respondent: I was then translated to...

Interviewer: Becas you've done a number of head offices jobs, haven't you?

Respondent: I've done...

Interviewer: Regional office.

Respondent: Things like that, yeah, at that time, I was translated to what we called the north-east frontier of London Diocese, and into a parish in Enfield, where I was a youth officer. I was a youth officer for the Deanery of Enfield, which was a significant deanery. It had 30 parishes in it, so it was quite big, and it had, demographically, it was really very varied. So you had the concrete jungle of Edmonton Green, and there was nothing green in Edmonton, right up to the leafy suburbs of Enfield and Clayhill and places like that, right on the very edge of the M25. That was a good time and it was a time when I had married and had a young family. But it was a time that lasted its three years, and it was good, but three years was enough.

[00:10:11]

Interviewer: Was enough, yeah.

Respondent: And we had, as a family, really rather missed a bit more of urban life in London. So I looked to make a move. What I knew at this time was that because of my views on the ordination of women, was that there weren't going to be many jobs for me in the Diocese of London.

Interviewer: Wow.

Respondent: So I opted to go to Southwark where my former vicar had gone, and he helped me find a place and I joined a team ministry in Greenwich called Kidbrooke, and I was vicar in the Kidbrooke team ministry with particularly responsibility for this gorgeous little church on the council estate called St Nicholas, and I stayed there for seven years.

Interviewer: Wow.

Respondent: Which was the longest that any clergyperson had actually ever stayed. And from there, I had to determine what my next move was going to be, and my neighbour, who was on the other side of the A2, but actually belonged in a different deanery, the Reverend Tony Crowe, was about to move into the penal service as a prison chaplain, having served at St Luke's for, I think, 22/23 years. And Tony was a very affable man, and very welcoming when I first met him, but on my side of the A2, we knew all about what was supposedly his only ministry. The reality was that actually, that St Luke's Charlton was just a very ordinary, run along sort of parish, doing all the regular things that you do in parish ministry. But of course, the thing that hit the headlines in those days was the responsibilities and support for gay and lesbian couples.

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: So that's really where...

Interviewer: So that started under him?

Respondent: It had begun under him, and when I became rector there, I decided one of the first things that we were going to do was to research the story and try and hold it together, because there were plenty of people in the congregation who held the story in their memories, but they were going to be dead within 20 years, and then the story would have died with them.

Interviewer: Yes. So the point at which you went there, what were your sort of...what was the formation of your own thinking about same sex relationships up to that point? Talk to me a bit about that.

Respondent: Well, up until that point, my...

Interviewer: Because we're almost the same age, and...

Respondent: WE are, well, you are a little younger than me, Jeremy, I have to say.

Interviewer: Very little, very little.

Respondent: You are just a little younger.

Interviewer: Weeks younger, Jeffrey.

Respondent: My understanding had been this: I had...I think I had my first serious encounters with gay men, that is knowing about them, when I was first of all at theological college.

[00:13:12]

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And it was an interesting time, because many of them were well and truly sorted out gay men, but there were a number who were quite unsorted, and quite often, it was the unsorted who gave the bad publicity to one and all. And I guess that's the case for everybody growing up, but it just seemed particularly acute amongst gay men.

Interviewer: Was it managed, how was it managed by the theological college?

Respondent: Well, not very well really, and certainly when I went to my second theological college, I can remember the opening night...

Interviewer: At Chichester?

Respondent: This was Chichester. The opening night we had an address from the principal and I sat in my pew in the chapel and he sat at the very front and he was...he was a lovely and well-intended man, but he had been clearly beamed in to sort the place out. So the opening words of his address that night were, "I would like to welcome you all here. Now, I have to tell you there are three things I will not have in this college: I will not have any drunkenness, I will not have any sexual promiscuity of any kind, and I will not have any overt homosexuality. Now, I'm terribly sorry, but I've got to say this." And I found myself sitting there thinking, "What have I come to? This is the most extraordinary beginning of my theological formation." And it was really quite repressive - in my time, a student was sacked, and...

Interviewer: For one of these misdemeanours.

Respondent: For one of these misdemeanours, and actually, he was a very good friend of mine and we've not stayed in touch since, but he was a good friend of mine. And when he got sacked, it was me he rang up and asked if I would just go and spend some time with him, so we had dinner together and I offered him support. And he was translated to another theological college where he thrived.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Okay? Ironically, it was Queen's, it was absolutely perfect. But he thrived and did very well there and, you know, has been a very solid, able, faithful priest since that time. When I was a curate, in my first curacy, I came across my first lesbian couple who wanted a committed partnership, and I remember observing the vicar doing a very simple prayer of blessing over their rings, which they exchanged quietly, without any fuss, after a Sunday service, in the side chapel. There was no ritual, no liturgy, there was no pomp and ceremony, no singing of hymns, it was just done on the quiet while everybody else was having their cup of tea at the back of the church. And I got to know Sheila and Helen really quite well; one of them I had known in a previous life as a teenager, and she'd served in my local church, but was single at that time. So I got to know them really quite well and had dinner at their house, and of course, I discovered the things that you discover about most gay or lesbian couples and that is they do the normal things that normal people do, you know, they have rows, they do the shopping together, you know, they do the cleaning, the ironing, and they have conversations, and occasionally they invite friends round, they have friends. And in this particular case, I became one of them, and I became very fond of Sheila and Helen. And they've since gone their separate ways, and they've both stayed within the church, which has been fantastic, they've been ordained now.

Interviewer: Right.

[00:17:11]

Respondent: So those are my early experiences, and of course, by the time I went to Charlton, you know, I wasn't phased by any of this.

Interviewer: No, indeed.

Respondent: And indeed I had been someone who had shared in the support of gay and lesbian couples, but like most clergy in those days, did it on the quiet, you know, it was a kind of...well, it wasn't a secret, but it wasn't something that was held publicly. Now, what happened at Charlton was that I found myself entering a parish with a 25 year history of supporting gay and lesbian couples by the time I got there, and it had been done with quite a lot of publicity.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: I thought that there were two weaknesses in the whole system when I got there. The one question that they were embarrassed to ask me at interview, but which I did get asked informally by members of the congregation was how did I feel about all of this, to which I could quite honestly say, "I do not have a problem with this at all, because people are people and church is for everybody." But what was clear to me was that my lovely predecessor, who had really blazed a trail for this, had really done it under what I can only describe as a kind of informal parish policy of, "You do it, vicar, and we'll back you up."

Interviewer: Yes. Rather than it actually being a parish policy.

Respondent: Than it actually being a parish policy. And so what I determined when I went there was that it was going to become a parish policy that moved from, "You do it, vicar, and we'll back you up," to, "We're in this together, and we're actually going to do this supportively." So what I arranged for was when any couples came to see me, I arranged that they had the equivalent of marriage preparation.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And that was always done with me, and a member of the laity from the congregation. So there were people in the congregation who took part in the preparation, got to know the couples, and then...

Interviewer: And that's what you would have done for a heterosexual couple?

Respondent: That's what I would have done for heterosexual couples, yeah. I think the other thing to flag up at this point is that when I was just party to hearsay as to what life was like in Charlton, you would imagine that there was a shedload of couples lining up at the vicarage door, but the reality is that you might get two couples a year.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: You know, they were not huge numbers.

Interviewer: No. And did you get a lot of heterosexual couples marrying?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: It was a busy church.

Respondent: It was a busy church, yes, I think that to my first year there, it was a changing demography, a big parish, there were 22,000 in the parish, and I think in my first year, we took over 100 funerals, and we had something like 20 weddings.

Interviewer: Okay. So actually, a couple of gay and lesbian couples, that was sort of maybe demographically appropriate, in that sense.

[00:20:25]

Respondent: Nobody would have really batted an eyelid, and there were a couple of humorous occasions when there was a service of blessing and you know, the old girls would actually wait outside the church door. I can remember overhearing one of them saying, "Here, there's some sort of do going on in the church, but I can't see any sign of the bride." But I mean, it was a fabulous experience, and we had some very strict regulations, I mean, we would say, "We'd like to know what you want, and this is what we can do," so there was no question of anybody dressing up as brides and grooms, there was no sense in which anybody could accuse us of making fun of heterosexual marriage. So there was nothing pretentious in that respect. And that was an agreed, you know, that was an agreed policy by the church.

Interviewer: Any liturgical parameters under which you operated? How did you do...?

Respondent: Well, this is what we did. About this time I decided to go and study for a research degree, and I did this in the United States. And I decided that what I wanted to research was the 25 years of history of this church community supporting gay and lesbian couples, and to let the congregation reflect on what this had done to them and for them. And so I did some empirical research and the congregation took part in that, and they were the people who did the interviews, they chose the people who were to be interviewed. And out of that empirical research, I put together my thesis, which then became the book that was published by Darton, Longman & Todd in 2001, called *Unheard Voices*. And it was called *Unheard Voices* deliberately, because we wanted to hear the voices of the people of the community and the congregation, rather than the voices of the clergy. The one thing I wanted to do was to deflect the accusation that this was the pet baby of one rather eccentric priest.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: Which was an easy accusation to make of my predecessor because no other people had been involved, but I was fairly determined that we were going to spread this wide. Now, when we'd done that, I handed the thesis over to a liturgical group that I convened at the church, and I said, "I would like you, based upon the insights and the findings of this research, to produce a liturgy that reflects that," and they did. And that was a liturgy in which they then presented to the Parochial Church Council, which was received by the Church Council, who then, at the end of that time, formulated an official policy.

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: And that policy stayed in place as it was until the government produced legislation for civil partnership rights.

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: And at that point, the PCC reviewed its previous policy and agreed that what we had been looking for in our 30 year campaign by then, was equal rights for those in same sex partnerships, to have the kind of safeguards and legal infrastructure that everybody else had. And once civil partnerships came on the scene, the PCC then altered its resolution to say that they would only do services of blessing for those who had been through a civil partnership. And what was interesting, Jeremy, was that we did ourselves out of a job, because by the time civil partnerships came in, by and large people stopped coming to us.

Interviewer: Really?

Respondent: Unless they were committed Christians who wanted to do something in church, by and large they didn't come to us.

[00:24:35]

Interviewer: So you've got a small number of people thereafter who were Christians and who wanted something in church as an extra plus, as it were, for whatever...

Respondent: Yes, and generally speaking, they would be people whose vicars were sympathetic to who they were and how they were as a couple but were a bit nervous about doing something liturgically for them in their own church.

Interviewer: Tell me a bit about how this process was viewed from the context of the Diocese, the perspective of the Diocese.

Respondent: Okay.

Interviewer: How did you negotiate all that and, you know...?

Respondent: My predecessor had, I think as part of, I don't know whether it was part of his campaign, but he had always notified the bishop every time a couple had come to him. And I thought this was really rather unnecessary myself, and thought really...

Interviewer: Never tell bishops more than they really want to hear!

Respondent: I thought really that here was a congregation that had now taken responsibility for itself. And the only time it proved to be problematic was at the time when Jeffrey John had received the Queen's mandate to be made Bishop of Reading, but was then persuaded to step aside. And then at that particular point, I was called to have a conversation with my bishop about what was going on.

Interviewer: Really?

Respondent: And so I went armed with a copy of the book.

Interviewer: Yeah, I bet you did.

Respondent: And I had a good hour with him and you know, he just said to me, you know, "The Archbishop of Canterbury has drawn a line in the sand and you're on the wrong side. And you're up for a curate this year, but I don't think I can send you one unless you get on the right side of this line."

Interviewer: Shocked face from interviewer...

Respondent: Well, it was, his chaplain was lovely and said, "Bishop, you do realise there are any number of factors as you go towards appointing a curate, and one of those is housing, and they've got a house." But the reality was that we were able to draft him a letter, I and the church wardens were able to draft him a letter in which we were able to reassure him that nothing would be done that would cause embarrassment to him as Diocesan Bishop, and yet, would maintain the integrity of the...

Interviewer: Of the ministry and the parish.

Respondent: Of the ministry and the parish. And about this time, I remember getting interviewed on Ed Sturton show on Sunday morning and the interviewer asking me about this, and me saying, "Well, you know, I'm loyal to my bishop," and I was, I was loyal to my bishop, I was very fond of him and I would not have done anything that would have been deliberately embarrassing to him. But I said to them on the radio, "These people have been doing this for 30 years and I'm not about to stab them in the back now."

Interviewer: No, exactly.

[00:27:57]

Respondent: And Ed Sturton said, more or less, "Good for you," or words to that effect.

Interviewer: Or words to that effect in a BBC kind of way.

Respondent: In a BBC kind of way.

Interviewer: You've done another book on gay and lesbian clergy, Jeff, tell me a bit about that, and how that came about?

Respondent: Well, *Face to Face* was really...it wasn't quite the sequel, but what inspired it really was what happened to Jeffrey.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: Jeffrey John. And I was very angry with what had happened there, and I thought, "Well, after Lambeth in 1988 which was, you know, on issues in human sexuality was just a disaster really."

Interviewer: 88 or 98?

Respondent: Oh, I meant 98, no, 98, absolutely.

Interviewer: The Lambeth One Day and all that.

Respondent: Absolutely right.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: You know, and the exorcism of Richard Kirker by the Bishop of Enugu or whatever it was. After all of that, I was, you know, given that they'd gone out of their way thereafter to say they would listen to gay and lesbian voices, I just thought, "Well, who are they going to do that? Because every gay and lesbian person is probably too scared to give voice to what they really think or feel." So I thought, "Well, what I'll do is..." We all know, and particularly in the capital, there are any number of clergy who are in relationships, let's find out a bit about them." And so, having been invited to the clergy consultation, which is a specially confidentially convened meeting of gay and lesbian clergy who want to gather together for this, I was asked to speak at it, and I have to say, it was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had. I cast my eye around the room at over 100 men and women, many of whom I'd known for years but hadn't got the foggiest idea.

Interviewer: About their personal life.

Respondent: About their personal life. And out of that, I made an appeal, and I asked whether any of them would volunteer to be interviewed, as couples. And many of them did and I gathered together over 30 hours of interview material, which formed the basis of *Face to Face*. And the title *Face to Face* came about, as you will see in the prologue, because it struck me that one of the things that had been missing was any kind of meaningful face to face dialogue between those who were advocating policy and those who were the recipients of it. And this, I thought, would be a safe way of enabling that to happen. It's really a book about listening, Jeremy.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And how you listen to people, and how you move on from the whole business of 'us and them', "There are two sides to this story." Well, what I discovered was that actually, there were not two sides to this story, there were at least three, right? There's your story, there's my story, and there's what your story does to me and mine to you, and the way in which I perceive it.

Interviewer: Yes.

[00:31:24]

Respondent: And, you know, I discovered many things in researching that book, and I had enormous admiration for the couples that I met, none of whom wanted to get out of their prams, none of whom wanted to shout and rage, but all of whom just wanted to be taken seriously.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And what I discovered was that there was an inequality in the way in which they were treated. But the men, when they went to meet their bishops were often asked the question, as indeed I was when I was newly ordained...

Interviewer: The question being?

Respondent: "Do you prefer men or women?"

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: That's the question that was asked to me just before I was ordained.

Interviewer: Yes, fairly blunt, I have to say.

Respondent: Well, you know, there's no getting around that really, is there?

Interviewer: So the men were asked that question, women weren't?

Respondent: Men were asked the question, and I asked, you know, "Has your bishop asked you about your sexuality?" and to a woman, they said, "No, it never cropped up," and I asked them, "Why do you think that is?" and one of them said, "I think it's because he just thinks the right man hasn't come along yet."

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: And I think there was that, there is that supposition, there is that supposition.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And part of that is down to stereotyping, which I think we've seen the end of now, but you know, in the 70s and 80s, you know, your stereotypical homosexual man was along the lines of...

Interviewer: Larry Grayson.

Respondent: Larry Grayson or...

Interviewer: *Am I Being Served?* or something.

Respondent: Yeah, you know who I'm talking about, yes.

Interviewer: John Humphries.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, effeminate gay kind of...

Respondent: Yeah, yeah. And of course, they don't really know how to place women in that bracket, you know, unless they want to dress them in sort of earth tones and Hush Puppies and short haircuts, you know, it's all very stereotypical and obscene, frankly. And so it was really quite an enlightening thing. I'm glad the book happened, because it's sold very well.

[00:33:45]

Interviewer: It's a pretty serious piece of listening, isn't it?

Respondent: That's what I wanted it to be and I wanted it to be so in the wake of what I thought had been quite serious non-listening at that time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: I don't know whether the book has had much effect. I've met people who have read it, I have received a reasonable sized postbag from people who've said, "Thank you for doing it," you know, "It needed to be said."

Interviewer: Yeah. Any green ink?

Respondent: No, I haven't...

Interviewer: In fact, have you had much green ink over the course of your ministry?

Respondent: What, in regards...?

Interviewer: In relation to your support or...?

Respondent: Not at all, not at all.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Respondent: And I think that's because I...how can I say this without sounding...I mean, this is going to be heard by people who just don't know me. I think that if you're a clergyman who wears a deerstalker and an anorak, and does this kind of ministry, then you're likely to be typecast as just a weirdo, an eccentric. I always wear a smart suit and polish my shoes.

Interviewer: And you do always.

Respondent: I do, I do.

Interviewer: (inaudible 00:35:04).

Respondent: I eat my (inaudible 00:35:06). Because I think that style matters, and I remember reading about one of my...one of my great heroes, as you know, is George Formby, and I met George Formby, I remember reading about George Formby being interviewed by Eddie Latta, who wrote some of his songs, who went on to be an undertaker, and Eddie Latta said to him, you know, "What was the big change?" and he said, "Well, the big change was when my wife pulled out of the theatre and stopped me wearing a cloth cap and clogs, and she dressed me in a smart suit." She said, "If you're going to sing dirty songs, then you need to...if you're going to sing them wearing clogs and a cloth cap, people are going to think you're a dirty person, whereas if you dress up smart, double-breasted suit, Brylcreemed hair, they don't know how to place you." Now, that's not quite the advice that I gave to myself at the time, I just like dressing smart, but I do think that actually, if you appear in normality, then what you do can have a semblance of normalcy about it as well. And really, all that we were trying to do in my time at St Luke's and all that I've tried to do in writing these two books has been to indicate that... the world's not going to come to an end just because you're a gay person and you happen to love another gay person, you know, that's just it. And I thin, I really do think, although it's taken a long time, I think we have moved on a hell of a long way from 1975.

[00:36:52]

Interviewer: Do you think so?

Respondent: Yeah, I do. I do. You and I wouldn't be having this kind of conversation.

Interviewer: No, we wouldn't and we wouldn't have had the other conversations.

Respondent: We wouldn't have had the other conversations either.

Interviewer: No, that's true. How do you feel about it when you look back at it all? I mean, how do you feel about all that's taken place, and where we are and where we're going? What's going to happen now?

Respondent: Well, I think that when I look, when I reflect on it now, I mean, the thing that really strikes me most of all is just how bored the young people were in my congregation were when they were interviewed about all of this. Simply because, as teenagers, they, to a boy and girl, knew people at school who were gay. So sexual orientation is something that was actually much more openly spoken about and talked about in school at a younger age, and that wasn't the case for you and me, you know, sex education was not done by school, it was done by your parents, and in my case, it was not done by them.

Interviewer: It was not done by my parents, exactly.

Respondent: So there is that. So there is a sense in which I think it's, to some extent, for my children, you know, it's all a bit of a joke, and you know, I have this conversation with my wife now where I say, "When I die, the thing that I hope happens is that when they come to clear out my books, my children look at these and they say, 'Look, do you remember the old man did this? What on earth was going on in those days?'"

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And I think that with another generation, that's where we will be. It may not happen in your and my lifetime, but I think that it will happen in another generation, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you think the church is listening better as a whole?

Respondent: Well, it depends what you mean by the church, if you mean the church worldwide.

Interviewer: No, I mean the Church of England.

Respondent: In the Church of England, I think my experience of it is that it is, and what we are learning is that, I think that what we're learning is that the voices that belong to people who have not got the ears to hear are getting fewer.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And I find this most interestingly amongst some of my evangelical friends, because I have hitherto always felt that actually, if you can be oversimplistic that gay orientation went with Anglo-Catholicism, you know, it's to do with dressing up in pretty things and all that sort of stuff.

Interviewer: Historically, yeah.

Respondent: Whereas the reality is that that's not the case.

[00:39:43]

Interviewer: No, absolutely.

Respondent: And I think that what I'm discovering pleurably now is that evangelicals are entering meaningfully into some kind of discourse of their own, and there are various opinions held, even amongst evangelical congregations.

Interviewer: Oh yes, I think that's right.

Respondent: And particularly amongst younger people. I mean, when was the last time you heard anybody talk about loving the sinner and hating the sin? I mean, I haven't heard it for years.

Interviewer: It's certainly not the line that was trotted out...

Respondent: It was an 80s and 90s-type thing, you know, but I don't hear that anymore. So I'm pleasantly optimistic and I have to be, I mean, I'm the eternal optimistic, I couldn't live...

Interviewer: I mean, your work at the moment is preparing a church for the future in some senses, so you have to be optimistic.

Respondent: in some respects, yeah, that is always the case, and you know, interestingly, that was the case when I was in parish ministry and we had a significant number of people, who felt a call to one kind of ministry or another, a significant number. And many of them had wound up at St Luke's Charlton because of its stance on justice and faith issues, which included the gay issue.

Interviewer: Yes, but broader than that, was it...

Respondent: Much broader than that, I mean, that was the other thing that came out of the first piece of research was that I discovered that there were several issues that had actually united the congregation. I mean, part of the research was what brings this group of people together in this church? And there's a brilliant book by James Hopewell, it's quite old now, it's called *Congregations* and Hopewell's theory essentially was that it was about storytelling, that actually, what you did was you found yourself joining a church where the church's story resonated with your own. So I would go to St Luke's and I discovered it was 20%, there were 20% people who had come from Africa, and they were there because they got a welcome.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: There was another group of people there who were divorced or remarried or who had illegitimate children, or they had children and were not married.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And they were there because they got a welcome. And there were gay couples who were there because they got a welcome, right? So there was a sense in which Hopewell's theory was absolutely true, and you know, there's me, you know, I don't stand in any of these things at this particularly point of my time, you know, I'm married, I'm heterosexual, I've got children, and...

Interviewer: Yeah, your privileges are dripping off you.

Respondent: Absolutely right, you know, and I wear smart suits. And I'm in that place because that story resonates with me, and one of the reasons why it resonates with me is because my story, as somebody discovering their vocation and being ordained, is one of someone from a poor background, you know, my parents were working class. I'm not working class, I've got an education, you know, I have three degrees, you know, I can't count myself as working class, but they were, they were working class. And they knew that education would be the way forward but they didn't know how to make it work for them. So there's a kind of part of my story which I now found myself in that church congregation, living out again, right?

[00:43:26]

Interviewer: So basically you were welcomed and nurtured.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah. I can remember there was a lovely couple at my church called Wally and Edna, and Wally and Edna, I met them outside the church door while I was waiting for a

hearse to arrive. And they looked at me and I said, "Good afternoon," and they said, "Good afternoon," and they went home. And they came to church, and a couple of years later, I said to Edna, I said to Wally, I said, "What brought you to St Luke's?" and he said, "Oh, you did." He said, "Edna and me were just doing our shopping and we were walking past you outside the church and you said good afternoon to us, and we got home and Edna said, 'Here, he seems like a nice chap, I think we'll go round there.'" And that was it, that was mission.

Interviewer: That's it.

Respondent: That was mission, it was actually being prepared to welcome people. That's what that book is about, it's about saying, "Please welcome people as they are."

Interviewer: Yeah. Isn't that what church is about?

Respondent: For me, it's Mary's fiat, it's the...it's taking the mighty from their seat and exalting the humble and the meek. You know, the have nots have, and the haves have not. It's the values of the world turned upside down. And you know, I think that what I would want to say is don't be afraid to live that out.

Interviewer: Thank you, Jeff. Is there anything I should have asked you?

Respondent: No, but I think, you know, it's important that you said that I'm not being paid, you know.

Interviewer: You've not been paid, let me just check, anything else? No? I think we're done. Thank you very much indeed.

Respondent: Okay, pleasure.

[End of Transcript]